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ABSTRACT

A Hong Kong survey, part of a primary school English-as-a-Second-Language curriculum development effort, investigated the extent to which extensive reading materials and activities are used at the upper elementary level, identified learner difficulties with English reading, and solicited teachers' opinions of the role of extensive reading in the curriculum. Questionnaire responses were received from 294 schools. Results indicate that most schools used class readers, and the most frequently used class activities were questions and answers, reading aloud, and silent reading. Among five instructional aims, respondents were most interested in developing students' interest in reading. Most respondents had class libraries with a range of English-language book types. However, students were given little classroom support in reading these books. Over one-quarter of the schools did not allow students to select their own English reading materials. Seven frequently-observed reading problems were identified including: inability to interpret ideas in the text, tackling words, sustaining reading, and following main text ideas. Respondents also ranked criteria used to select reading materials. A large majority of schools supported the idea of extensive reading, but only about 40 percent expressed interest in a proposed elementary school reading program. Contains 7 references and 16 tables. (MSE)

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ENGLISH EXTENSIVE READING IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM: CURRENT PRACTICES AND NEW INITIATIVES

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ENGLISH EXTENSIVE READING IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM: CURRENT PRACTICES AND NEW INITIATIVES

Vivienne Yu, Emily Chiu, Winnie Siu and Rachel Yau

1. Introduction

This paper describes a territory-wide survey of the use of children's literature, class readers and other extensive reading materials in Hong Kong primary schools. The survey was part of a larger, on-going project at the Institute of Language in Education (ILE) to develop an English extensive reading scheme for primary schools in Hong Kong, and was an attempt to find out whether extensive reading is currently practised in schools and teachers' to elicit opinions on the place of extensive reading in the primary curriculum.

In this paper, the findings of the survey are presented and the implications for the development of the Primary English Extensive Reading Scheme are discussed.

2. Background to the Survey

There has been a growing interest in English extensive reading programmes in Hong Kong schools in recent years. At the secondary level, there is a proliferation of reading schemes. Kwan (1988), in a survey of the use of extensive reading schemes in Secondary One, reported that of the 169 schools which responded to her questionnaire, 115 claimed they had some form of extensive reading programmes in their schools. Moreover, the ILE has also set up extensive reading schemes for public-sector schools in response to growing demand. The Scheme for junior secondary students is now well established, and at present there are 79 schools participating in the Scheme. In addition, the development of a reading scheme for upper primary pupils also began in the Institute in September 1993. Work on developing resource materials suitable for use by Primary 5 and 6 pupils is now under way.

As for secondary reading schemes, an important aim of the Primary Reading Scheme is to help pupils develop a reading habit. Feedback from teachers involved in the Secondary Reading Scheme and teachers on ILE Refresher Courses shows clearly that they believe the best chance for a reading habit to take root is to nurture it as early as possible. They point out that while it is good to have a reading scheme at Secondary One, it will be even better if there is a reading programme at primary level so that the habit can be formed earlier. As Southgate (1983:74) puts it when discussing ways of encouraging children to read, "the longer the establishment of the habit is delayed the less likely it is that it will ever be acquired."

Even though the idea of having English extensive reading at primary level has considerable support, hardly any information was available on whether there are extensive reading activities in primary schools at present. The survey was therefore undertaken to find out what the current practices are, and what primary teachers think about extensive reading. We also believe this background information is crucial if we are to develop a reading programme that can meet the needs of the schools. As our Scheme is designed for Primary 5 and 6 pupils the survey was targeted at upper primary level.

3. Aims of the Survey

The aims of the survey were as follows:

1. To investigate the extent to which extensive reading materials and extensive reading activity types are used at present at upper primary level. This would enable us to have a better understanding of the needs of schools as well as to build on what already exists when developing the Primary Reading Scheme.

2. To find out whether upper primary pupils have any difficulties in reading in English and if so, what these problems are. This would help us in the design of activities to increase pupils' reading proficiency.

3. To gauge primary teachers' opinions on the place of extensive reading in the curriculum. This would provide data on whether there is a positive climate for extensive reading at primary schools, and help establish the nature and extent of support needed.

4. Subjects and Methods

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire survey in October 1993. The questionnaire consisted of four main areas:

1. General information about the schools, including type (government, aided, private, co-educational, boys', girls' etc.), and number of classes in Primary 5 and Primary 6.

2. The use of class readers in Primary 5 and Primary 6. Schools were asked whether class readers were included in the curriculum, the type of activities used in teaching and their purpose in using the readers.

3. The use of class libraries at these two levels. Schools were asked whether there were class libraries in their schools, the kinds of materials included and the use these were put to.

4. English extensive reading in the primary curriculum. Schools were asked to express their opinions about extensive reading in the primary curriculum and to indicate whether they were interested in participating in the ILE Primary Extensive Reading Scheme. They were also asked to identify what problems (if any) their pupils experienced in reading.

The questionnaire was sent by post to 435 primary schools randomly chosen from the 852 primary schools in Hong Kong. The method employed was to select alternate schools listed in "Primary School Lists by District 1994-95" published by the Education Department. 294 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 67.6%. These schools included a representative range of types (Table 1), and on average there were 3.5 classes at both Primary 5 and 6 levels.

The responses to the questions were computed for absolute frequencies and percentages. Full information appears in Tables 1-14 in the Appendix. The main findings are presented and discussed in the next section of the paper.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Use of Class Readers in Primary 5 and Primary 6

Of the 294 respondents, 210 (71.7%) prescribed class readers in their school textbook list for Primary 5 and 212 (72.6%) for Primary 6. Most schools used one to two class readers in a year (Tables 2 and 3). The three most frequently used activities in teaching class readers were questions and answers, reading aloud and silent reading. A variety of other activities were also used, ranging from role-play to dictation and tests (Table 4).

Schools were asked what aims they wanted to achieve through using class readers. Five aims were listed and the respondents were asked to rank them. The aim "To develop interest in reading" stood out significantly among the others. 170 respondents (85.5%) quoted this as either the most or second most important aim of using class readers in their schools (Table 5).

There is a dilemma here. As most schools use only one or two class readers a year, it would be difficult to help pupils to develop interest in reading and a reading habit. Other measures are obviously needed to address this issue.

5.2 The Use of Class Libraries in Primary 5 and Primary 6

Most respondents (280 schools or 95.9%) claimed that they had class libraries with English and Chinese books at both Primary 5 and Primary 6 (Table 6). The English materials and books in the class libraries included a range of types, with animal

stories, fables, adventure stories, stories about daily life and fact books about hobbies and games being the most frequently cited examples (Table 7).

When asked how the books in the class libraries were used, schools indicated that most books were meant for pupils to borrow and read out of class, whether they be Chinese or English books. Although 60.6% of schools had library periods, it was unlikely that pupils would be given much help in their English reading since these periods were usually supervised by the school librarian or the class teacher rather than the English teacher. Only in 13 schools (4.7%) were pupils given time in the English periods to read English books, and even in these schools this was only done occasionally (Table 8).

The picture that emerges is that although primary pupils were not accustomed to reading English books on their own, little guidance and support were given. Moreover, our experience tells us that when pupils borrow books from the class library, they usually choose Chinese books. We may thus conclude that even though most schools have a selection of English books in their class libraries, this cannot adequately serve the purpose of promoting English extensive reading.

It is also interesting to find that although most schools allowed pupils to choose by themselves what titles to read from the class library, 73 schools (26.2%) sometimes or never let pupils choose their own reading materials or borrow books by themselves. In over half of these schools, books were given out randomly to pupils by the teacher (Tables 9a and 9b).

5.3 English Extensive Reading in the Primary Curriculum

The respondents were asked whether their pupils had problems with reading in English and if so, what they thought made reading difficult for their pupils. Seven frequently observed reading problems among pupils were listed and respondents were asked to indicate the degree of seriousness of each problem for their pupils on a four-point scale (from "most serious" to "not a problem for my pupils"). The overwhelming response was that teachers thought reading was difficult for the pupils, as shown in Table 10. The most serious problem encountered by the pupils, as reported by the teachers, was their inability to interpret implicit ideas in the text. Other difficult areas included tackling words, sustaining reading for a reasonable period of time, and to a lesser degree, following the main ideas of a text. The findings parallel the results of the IEA Reading Literacy study, which shows Hong Kong primary pupils had great difficulty with processing English texts, resulting in poor performance in reading tests (Cheung 1992).

The findings show clearly that more needs to be done to help primary pupils develop reading proficiency. Research studies on English extensive reading programmes at primary level seem to indicate that incorporating these programmes into the curriculum can help pupils to improve their reading ability. Elley's study of a nationwide extensive reading programme in the Fiji Islands shows that the

'book flood' classes made much greater improvement in all aspects of English than the control groups using an Oral English Syllabus based on audio-lingual approaches, and that the improvement was especially marked in reading (Elley and Mangubhai 1983). Similar positive language gains were also reported in two nationwide extensive reading programmes for primary pupils, one in Singapore (Ng 1988, Elley 1988) and the other in Brunei (Ng 1992). It will be interesting to see whether a reading programme for Hong Kong primary pupils will yield similar results.

The schools were also asked to rank seven given criteria for selecting books (Table 11). The three most highly ranked criteria were "interesting content for pupils", "appropriate length, structures and vocabulary items for pupils" and "good layout" (69.6%, 48.2% and 41.6% of the respondents respectively). A point of interest is that the criterion "language level matches exactly that of the coursebooks" was the fourth most highly ranked criterion on the list (29.4% of the respondents). This indicates that many teachers viewed extensive reading as a means to consolidate language taught in coursebooks rather than a channel to provide pupils with more exposure to the language.

When asked about their opinions on extensive reading, 277 schools (94.5%) believed that extensive reading was useful in helping their pupils to learn English (Table 12). They also believed that extensive reading could benefit their pupils in various ways (Table 13), including helping them gain confidence and interest in reading, develop reading skills as well as independent learning. Only 4 schools (1.6%) stated that they did not think their pupils could benefit from extensive reading.

Schools were also asked to indicate whether they were interested to join the Primary Reading Scheme that the ILE is developing. The result is very encouraging: 120 schools (40.8%) expressed an interest to join the Scheme and a further 20 (6.8%) would like more information (Table 14a). When asked how many English periods they thought should be allocated for extensive reading every week, 69.6% opted for one period a week, 13% suggested two periods, and another 13% half a period. The mean number of periods suggested was 1.03 (Table 14b).

However, it is worth noting that of the 277 schools which agreed that extensive reading was useful, only 120 expressed interest in joining the Scheme. Of course, it is possible that some schools are already running their own extensive reading programmes and do not see the need to join the ILE Scheme. But the more likely reason is that many teachers are still sceptical about allocating English periods to aid pupils' extensive reading. One can conclude that about 50% of the schools have seen the need for incorporating extensive reading into the curriculum, while extensive reading is still regarded by the other schools as an "optional extra", a "luxury" one can only afford when textbooks have been covered.

6. Conclusion - Implications for the Primary English Extensive Reading Scheme

The data from the questionnaire provide useful information for the development and design of the Primary Extensive Reading Scheme. Firstly, it is heartening to know that most teachers surveyed consider extensive reading as useful in helping their pupils learn English. They also seem to agree that the way this should be done is through helping pupils gain confidence and interest in reading and develop the ability to read independently. However, as discussed earlier in this paper, current practices in the majority of schools are unlikely to foster in the pupils a reading habit in English, since too little emphasis is given to extensive reading.

We hope the Primary Extensive Reading Scheme can help to redress the balance and serve as a breakthrough. Our plan is to fully incorporate the Scheme into the English curriculum and ask schools to allocate class time to it. This will ensure the pupils are constantly exposed to high-interest, comprehensible input and are also given help by their English teachers. The fact that 120 schools have indicated interest in participating in the Scheme shows clearly that even at this early stage, there is recognition that extensive reading should be accorded a much higher priority and become part of the English curriculum.

The survey also reveals that the teachers think their pupils have considerable problems with reading. These include, among others, reading the text word by word, not knowing how to guess words from context, not being able to understand meaning not explicitly stated, and finding the language too difficult. The implication is that besides providing pupils with high-interest books, we must also consider, in our design, ways to prepare our pupils to read books on their own. One way of doing this is to prepare "Help" cards that provide pre-reading activities to help them get into the book. These activities should aim at providing pupils with information of the general context and helping them use features such as pictures and the blurb to direct their understanding. Essential vocabulary items for understanding the book should also be introduced in the "Help" cards. In addition, "Activity" cards which pupils complete after reading a book will be useful in facilitating reading as this provides not only a reading record but also feedback to the pupils themselves on how well they have understood the book. Moreover, the "Activity" cards can stimulate pupils' imagination by asking them to give response to the characters, events, and ideas of the book. It is hoped that with the provision of high interest books as well as the "Help" and "Activity" cards, pupils will eventually be able to read books on their own and build up confidence and interest in reading extensively in English.

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Appendix

Table 1

General Information About Schools Responding to the Questionnaire

count	Boys'	Girls'	Co-ed	row total
Government		1	21	22 (7.5%)
Aided	2	12	245	259 (88.1%)
Private	1	3	9	13 (4.4%)
column total	3 (1%)	16 (5.4%)	275 (93.5%)	294 (100%)

Table 2

Class Readers Prescribed in the School Textbook List

count	Yes	No	total
P.5	210 (71.7%)	83 (28.3%)	293
P.6	212 (72.6%)	80 (27.4%)	292

Table 3

Number of Class Readers Prescribed

No. of books	P. 5 count	P. 5 percent	P. 6 count	P. 6 percent
1	120	58.3%	125	60.1%
2	79	38.3%	76	36.5%
>2	7	3.5%	6	3.0%

Table 4

Activities Used in Teaching Class Readers

Activity	Count	%
Questions & Answers	201	95.7
Reading Aloud	188	89.5
Silent Reading	182	86.7
Role-Play	129	61.4
Worksheets	67	31.9
Dictation & Tests	62	29.5

Table 5

The Aims of Using Class Readers

aim	count		cum. %
	most important	second most important	
To Develop Interest In Reading	143 (71.9%)	27 (13.6%)	85.5%
To Develop Reading Skills	35 (18.2%)	48 (25.0%)	43.2%
To Consolidate Grammar And Vocab. Learnt In Textbooks	13 (6.5%)	21 (10.6%)	17.1%
To Develop Skills In Reading And Writing	8 (4.0%)	9 (4.5%)	8.5%
To Develop Knowledge	5 (2.5%)	17 (8.5%)	11%

Table 6

Class Library For P.5 and P.6 Classes

	count	%
Yes	280	95.9%
No	12	4.1%

Table 7

Types of Materials Included in the Class Libraries

Books	Count	%
A. Fiction: Types		
Animal Stories	264	95.3
Fables, Legends, Fairy Tales	261	94.2
Adventures	233	84.1
Stories About Daily Life	223	80.5
Detective Stories	141	50.9
Thrillers and Ghost Stories	66	23.8
Love Stories	47	17.0
B. Non-fiction): Types		
Hobbies and Games	204	73.6
Facts of Life	171	61.4
Travels	127	45.8
Biographies	74	26.7
C. Others: Types		
Poems, Rhymes	159	57.4
Jokes, Riddles, Comics	113	40.8
Plays	33	11.9
Magazines and Newspaper	15	5.4

Table 8

How Books in the Class Libraries Are Used

	count Yes	No	total
To Be Read In English Periods	13 (4.7%)	266 (95.3%)	279 (100%)
To Be Read In Library Periods	169 (60.6%)	110 (39.4%)	279 (100%)
To Be Read Out Of Class	237 (84.9%)	42 (15.1%)	279 (100%)

Table 9(a)

Whether the Pupils Choose What To Read

From the Class Library Themselves

	count	%
Yes	206	73.8%
Sometimes	68	24.4%
No	5	1.8%

Table 9(b)

If "Sometimes" Or "No", How the Books Are selected

For Individual Pupils

	Yes	No	total
Teachers Give Out Titles Randomly To Pupils	47 (68.1%)	22 (31.9%)	69 100%
Teachers Select Different Titles For Pupils	29 (42%)	40 (58%)	69 100%

Table 10

To What Extent Each Of the Following Problems

Makes Reading Difficult For the Pupils

1 = most serious;
2 = serious;
3 = not very serious;
4 = no problem for pupils

	1	2	3	4
Not Able To Understand Meaning Which Is Not Explicitly Stated In The Text	66 22.8%	156 53.1%	61 20.7%	3 1.0%
Do Not Know How To Guess Words From The Context, Including The Surrounding Text, Illustrations, Layout, etc.	66 22.8%	147 50.0%	73 24.8%	4 1.4%
Find The Language Too Difficult	64 21.8%	138 46.9%	81 27.6%	4 1.4%
Not Able To Sustain Reading For A Reasonable Amount Of Time	46 15.6%	148 50.3%	74 25.2%	11 3.7%
Always Read The Text Word By Word	42 14.3%	142 48.3%	93 31.6%	8 2.7%
Not Able To Follow The Main Ideas Of The Book	31 10.5%	117 39.8%	130 44.2%	11 3.7%
Always Read Back Unnecessarily	10 3.4%	102 34.7%	149 50.7%	21 7.1%

Table 11

Criteria For Selecting Books For Extensive Reading

criterion	count		cum. %
	most important	second most important	
Interesting Content For Pupils	101 (40.4%)	73 (29.2%)	69.6%
Appropriate Length, Structures & Vocab. Items For Pupils	59 (23.7%)	61 (24.5%)	48.2%
Good Layout	45 (18.0)	59 (23.6%)	41.6%
Language Level Matches Exactly That Of The Coursebooks	38 (15.3)	35 (14.1)	29.4%
Help Develop Pupils' Knowledge And Values	4 (1.6%)	12 (4.8%)	6.4%
Include Exercises And Activities	2 (0.8%)	5 (2.0%)	2.8%
Recommended By Publishers, Other Schools, Teachers, etc.	1 (0.4%)	3 (1.2%)	1.6%

Table 12

Whether The Respondents Think Extensive Reading Is Useful In Helping Their Pupils To Learn English

	count	%
Yes	277	94.5%
No	16	5.5%

Table 13

Perceived Benefits Of Extensive Reading By The Respondents

benefit	count		cum. %
	most significant	second most significant	
Gain Confidence & Interest In Reading In English	134 (53.8%)	47 (18.9%)	72.7%
Develop Reading Skills	44 (17.7%)	66 (26.5%)	44.2%
Develop More Independent Learning	34 (13.7%)	70 (28.1%)	41.8%
Improve Reading Speed	18 (7.2%)	32 (12.9%)	20.1%
Learn Useful Sentence Structures & Vocab. Items	16 (6.4%)	31 (12.4%)	18.9%

Table 14(a)

Whether The Respondents Would Like Their Pupils To Join The English Extensive Reading Scheme

	count	%
Yes	120	40.8
No	154	52.4
Not Decided	20	6.8

Table 14 (b)

If "Yes", Number Of English Period(s) Suggested Per Week For The Programme

No. of periods	count	%
1	80	69.6
2	15	13.0
1/2	15	13.0